

Understanding Action Research

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MALT 2002 – 2B

Note: This unpublished draft was prepared to assist MALT learners in their understanding of action research which forms the basis of many of their major projects. Please do not quote it. Use original sources.

Preface

This Outline is prepared for the MALT 2002-2B cohort of learners as a backgrounder to the Week 3: Understanding Action Research and Systems Session. It is intended to stimulate thinking and inquiry regarding the systemic and cyclic nature of action research and the various ways in which organizational development consulting work, change management work and systemic thinking inform action research and visa versa. Faculty will be sharing with learners perspectives drawn from their experience of using and working with O.D., change and systemic concepts in the context of action research.

In preparing this Outline, the following web sites were reviewed, with excerpts and diagrams used to assist in creating this overview of action research. Learners are invited to explore these web sites further for a more complete description and background on this topic.

South Florida Center for Educational Leaders web site

<http://www.fau.edu/divdept/coe/sfcel/define.htm>

Royal Roads University

http://modules.royalroads.ca/openwebresources/malt/welcome_fm.htm

Martin Ryder University of Colorado at Denver School of Education

http://carbon.cudenver.edu/~mryder/itc/act_res.html

Johns Hopkins University

<http://www.sitesupport.org/module2/theactionresproc.htm>

A more complete list of references is provided at the end of this Outline. In addition, learners are referred to the reference list included in the **LT 563 Leading Systematic Inquiry into Organizations Binder**.

Action Research – What, Why, Where and How?

LT 513 (Systematic Inquiry in Organizations) provides a description of action research (Unit 2), which essentially states that action research can be defined as “*research, which involves the members of an organization as an integral part of the research process*”. It suggests that, the researcher, “*involves the members in varying degrees of analysis, fact-finding, conceptualization, planning, execution and evaluation and then uses the results of the initial study to begin a new cycle of these activities This emphasis is on research that leads to action. (Faris, p.4-3)*”

While this is a valid and appropriate description, it is also important to consider the scope and nature of action research and to come to one’s own interpretation and understanding of what action research is about and why it has value.

During the 1970’s and 1980’s, considerable dissatisfaction with some of the early assumptions made by Kurt Lewin, who is generally credited for introducing the action research methodology. In essence, action research was initially seen as ‘applied science’ involving ‘expert-led experimentation in the social domain (for further reference on this see G Midgley, Systemic Intervention (2000), p198). With this came a new generation of action research thinking that concerned itself more with the benefits of fostering participation in the workplace and in community settings. Renewed interest in learning as a group involving both individual and collective reflection led to what is referred to as ‘participatory’ action research and more recently ‘cooperative inquiry’.

While there are multiple definitions for action research, most people involved in this field of endeavor would agree that four basic themes need to be present:

- *the empowerment of participants*
- *collaboration through participation*
- *acquisition of knowledge*
- *social change.*

How is Action Research Defined by Those Who Have Written About it?

The following includes several 'definitions' of action research, some of which are taken from the South Florida Center for Educational Leaders web-site

<http://www.fau.edu/divdept/coe/sfcel/define.htm>

Action research is a three-step spiral process of (1) planning which involves reconnaissance; (2) taking actions; and (3) fact-finding about the results of the action.

Kurt Lewin (1947)

Action research is the process by which practitioners attempt to study their problems scientifically in order to guide, correct, and evaluate their decisions and actions. **Stephen Corey (1953)**

Action research in education is study conducted by colleagues in a school setting of the results of their activities to improve instruction. **Carl Glickman (1992)**

Action research is a fancy way of saying let's study what's happening at our school and decide how to make it a better place. **Emily Calhoun (1994)**

Action research is a frame of mind more than a specific research methodology. It is a democratic, problem-solving approach researchers take towards their own activities and the areas of concern others bring to them. **Jim Parsons. (2002)**

Action research is a process for encouraging positive change. **Bogdan & Biklen (1992)**

Action research is a form of disciplined inquiry that impacts directly on a teacher's practice and empowers them to renew their classrooms and promote instructional improvement. **Glanz, (1991)**

Action research is a form of self-reflective inquiry. **Kemmis, (1983)**

Action research is the systematic study of attempts to improve educational practice by groups of participants by means of their own practical actions and by means of their own reflection upon the effects of those actions. **Ebbutt, (1985)**

Action research is a disciplined process of inquiry conducted by and for those taking the action. The primary reason for action research is to assist the "actor" in improving and/or refining his or her actions. Sagor, (2000)

WHAT IS ACTION RESEARCH?

Action research can be undertaken in many different contexts, from public sector to business sector, from organization to community and from a variety of fields of endeavor such as healthcare, education, development, management, social work, the arts, etc.

Action research can include many research methodologies, which pursue action and research outcomes at the same time. It therefore has some components, which resemble *consultancy* or *organizational change management*, and some that resemble field research.

Conventional scientific research (e.g. applied science) has developed certain principles to guide its conduct. These principles are appropriate for certain types of research; but they can actually inhibit effective participation and organizational change. Action research has a different set of principles.

Action research is inquiry or research in the context of focused efforts to improve the quality of an organization and its performance. It typically is designed and conducted by practitioners who cooperatively plan and analyze data to improve their own practice. Action research can be done by individuals or by teams of colleagues. The team approach is called *collaborative or cooperative inquiry*.

In the educational context, action research is seen as a deliberate, solution-oriented investigation that is group or personally owned and conducted. It is characterized by spiraling cycles of problem identification, systematic data collection, reflection, analysis, data-driven action taken, and, finally, problem redefinition. The linking of the terms "action" and "research" highlights the essential features of this method: trying out ideas in practice as a means of increasing knowledge about and/or improving curriculum, teaching, and learning (For further background, refer to Kemmis & McTaggart, 1982).

Action research focuses on sustainable improvements. It provides opportunities to reflect on and assess the work; to explore and test new ideas, methods, and materials; to assess how effective new approaches are based on planned action; to share feedback and to make decisions about which new approaches.

As mentioned earlier, the advancement of action research is credited to Kurt Lewin, who, in 1946, used it as a methodology for intervening in the post-war issues of the day. In 1953, Stephen Corey, a researcher from Columbia University's Teacher's College, published Action Research to Improve School Practice.

Stephen Corey and others at Teachers College of Columbia University introduced the term action research to the educational community in 1949. Corey (1953) defined action research as the process through which practitioners study their own practice to solve their personal practical problems.

Sagor (2000) identifies three purposes for action research: building the reflective practitioner, making progress on organization wide priorities, and building a professional culture in the educational arena. These outcomes help to create an environment of learning and progress toward educational and learning goals. As educational institutions seek to develop reflective practitioners who are teacher leaders and decision-makers in education programs, the action research process is also seen as a strategy for continued professional and personal development.

Again in the educational context, teacher action research is, according to John Elliott, "concerned with the everyday practical problems experienced by teachers, rather than the 'theoretical problems' defined by pure researchers within a discipline of knowledge" (Elliott, cited in Nixon, 1987). Action research is a collaborative activity where practitioners work together to help one another design and carry out investigations in their organizations, teams and classrooms.

The research study team provides support and a forum for sharing questions, concerns, and results. Engaging in collaborative action research helps eliminate the isolation that has long characterized teaching, as it promotes professional dialogue and thus, creates a more professional culture in schools. The approach is naturalistic, using participant-observation techniques of ethnographic research, is generally collaborative, and includes characteristics of case study methodology (Belanger, 1992).

Jim Parson has noted that, "Action research is often called "collaborative action research". http://modules.royalroads.ca/openwebresources/malt/welcome_fm.htm Parsons adds that, " It is especially useful for working together to improve worker behaviors and

group dynamics. It has been used in a variety of institutions to study on-the-job activities, assess current practices, and evaluate the impact of new ideas. The highlight of any action research project is the large amount of interaction between the researcher or research team and the research collaborators – those being researched. These collaborations provoke new understandings and help participants to explore the impact of these understandings on personal or institutional practice”. Parsons states that there are typically three phases of action research:

Initiation – *where research problems are negotiated between the researcher(s) and the researched,*

Detection – *a study of the particular problem(s), and*

Judgment – *discussing and making decisions about the impact and importance of the findings.*

What Action Research Is Not

(Adapted from Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988).

Action research is not simply problem solving. It is systematic and collaborative. It involves problem posing, the search for the questions beneath the questions that we typically ask about our practices.

Action research is not done 'to' other people. Action research is research by practitioners on their 'own' work, and it is done with the help of other practitioners.

Action research is not hierarchical, but rather is democratic. It is people working together in relationships of equal ownership and influence regarding the action research project.

Action research is not a way to implement predetermined answers to questions. Action research explores, discovers, and works to create contextually specific solutions to organizational and educational problems.

Understanding Action Research in Context to Consulting Practice, Organizational Change Management and Systemic Thinking

The very nature of action research is 'cyclic' and by comparison so are the fields of Consulting Practice (e.g. Organizational Development), Organizational Change Management and Systemic Thinking. All display both iterative and recursive cycles, hypercycles and fractal qualities (for further reference to these systemic terms, see S. Kelly and Mary Ann Allison, *The Complexity Advantage*, 1998). All of these activities display emergent phenomenon. It is no wonder then that the application of systemic thinking, change and organizational development concepts 'fit' so well with action research methodologically.

There are various methodological approaches that can be incorporated into action research. The four 'frames' or paradigms of research inquiry, namely scientific (i.e. traditional) research inquiry, critical inquiry, interpretive inquiry and ecological inquiry (ala Tara Fenwick, 2002) all have variable use and applicability in undertaking action research work.

Systemic approaches to organizational change management and organizational development and intervention work in general will also be explored.

What is important to understand in this exploration of action research and other forms of work involving the systemic assessment and determination of behaviors, relationships and patterns that affect work (e.g. change management, organizational development, intervention work, etc.) is the cyclic nature of all of this work. As indicated earlier, action research is both recursive and iterative. It informs itself as it emerges and grows and learns as a result. It is a 'living' form of research.

Models of action research are often shown as cycles. The most common examples are Stringer's look-think-act approach. Kemmis and McTaggart have a four-step process. Others combine and refine these approaches, retaining the cyclic nature of this work.

As with action research, systemic thinking also involves cyclic, feedback patterns and relationships. While there are many examples that can be referenced with respect to the cyclic nature of systemic thinking (For further reference, see R. Flood, *Rethinking the*

Fifth Discipline: Learning within the Unknowable, 1999), the approach taken by Checkland (refer to Soft Systems Methodology in Action, 1990) is by far the most relevant and easily understood systemic model for doing with action research. Checkland's work has been referenced by various writers (Flood, 1999, Midgley, 2000).

Other ways of viewing action research systemically can be found in the literature. During this **Understanding Action Research and Systems Session**, new approaches based on *systemic inquiry* will be explored as applications for action research, including, Soft Systems Methodology (Checkland), Spiral Dynamics (Beck & Cowen), Integral Psychology (Wilber), etc.

The Action Research Process

Action research, as defined by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), is systematic and reflective. In their model, action research consists of four phases that take place in a cycle. These four phases are: *planning, acting, observing and reflecting*.

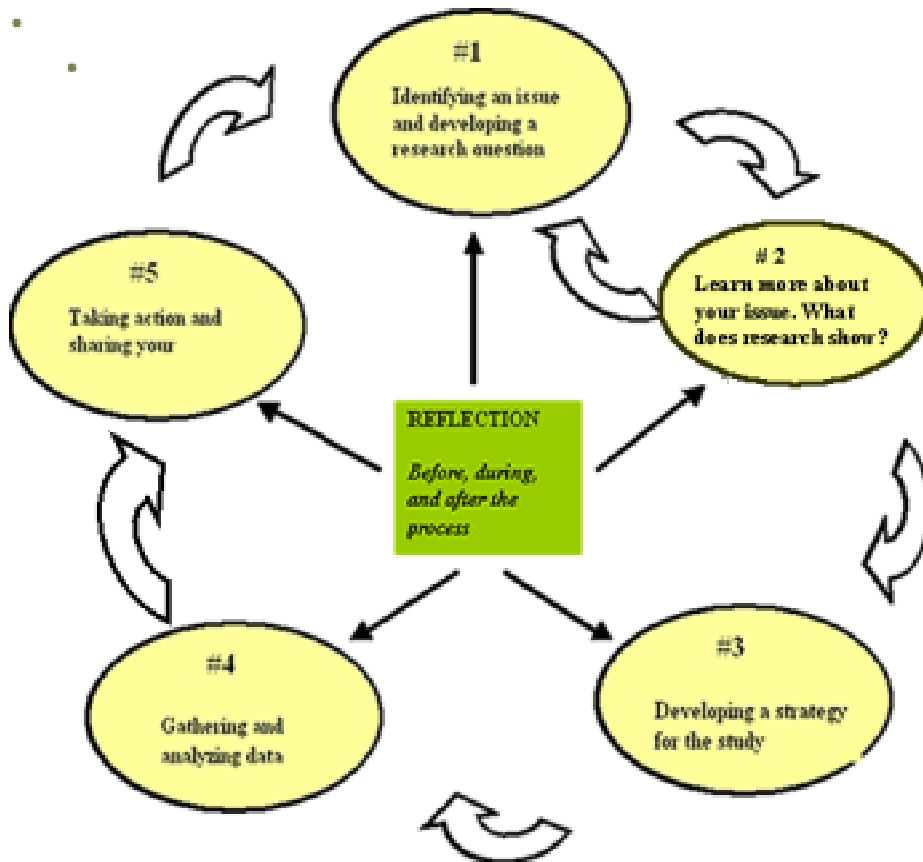
Planning - *all the members of the research team question 'what are' the realities of their particular practices, and begin to search for "what ought to be?"*

Acting - *the researchers implement the plan they have collaboratively developed, addressing all or a particular set of problems or issues.*

Observing - *simultaneous with action is the collection of data. Observation is important for subsequent reflection and action. Various observation methods can be used.*

Reflecting - *the researchers reflect upon what is happening with their project, developing revised action plans based upon new questions that may arise and what they are learning from the process of planning, acting, and observing.*

The Action Research process as viewed by Johns Hopkins University <http://www.sitesupport.org/module2/theactionresproc.htm> employs five steps or components, as shown below.



There are several other models as mentioned earlier (e.g. Stringer) that are more or less compatible to the ones outlined above. Essentially, each model describes a process that is cyclic in nature and continuously emergent (i.e. the completion of one cycle leads into another).

Comparing models of action research with other ‘systemic’ ways of viewing life and the organizations and worlds we live in provides a plethora of opportunities to combine and integrate methods for doing action research in various contexts.

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